CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Emir's Letter

Before he left France, Abd el-Kader showered with letters of gratitude all those who had done him a good turn, however small. Two humble women won a particularly warm spot in the emir's heart and in the hearts of all his entourage.

Natalie and Saint-Maurice (Catholic nuns sometimes take the names of male saints) of the Dominican Sisters of Charity of Tours had been assigned to look after the women and children at the chateau, thanks to Bishop Dupuch. Their piety and wholehearted care for their charges created a bond that extended to all the Arabs. Abd el-Kader spoke for his community in an extravagant letter of appreciation to Sister Natalie, who had virtually lived among the Arabs at Amboise: "… A lady of deep piety, a shining mirror of goodness made from the purest mother of pearl, a marabout known for her noble feelings, this is our gracious, always patient and obliging Natalie. In her, we have seen only a deep attachment to her religion, a perfect intelligence, sense of discretion and breeding…"

The emir's sentiments were echoed in confessions of mutual admiration by the sisters: "Allowing for certain exceptions of a theological nature, there is no Christian virtue that Abd el-Kader does not practice to the highest degree," Sister Natalie wrote in an internal communication to her order. She even wrote that she would have been happy to have devoted the rest of her life serving the emir and his followers.

Above all, Abd el-Kader was in the thrall of Louis-Napoleon. The prince-president's generosity of spirit had, indeed, "conquered" him. He petitioned the mayor of Amboise to allow his Arabs to vote in the upcoming plebiscite that would confirm popular approval of Napoleon's military coup of the previous year. Abd el-Kader offered the thought that they had earned a kind of French citizenship, a "right of soil." The children they had given birth to in France, and the time spent were evidence enough.

In a gesture of goodwill to his liberator, on November 21, 1852, fourteen male votes were cast for Louis-Napoleon's imperial renewal in an urn specially provided for the Arabs of Amboise. President Louis

Napoleon would soon become Emperor Napoleon III. By a curious convergence of the stars, on that same date twenty years earlier, Abd el-Kader had been elected Commander of the Faithful on the Plain of Ghriss.

Abd el-Kader was still Commander of the Faithful on December 21, 1852, as he set sail from Marseille for Turkey. To be sure, his official smala had shriveled to a remnant of family members and followers. Yet, its ranks had become more "catholic," enlarged after his five years of stoic endurance not by adoring Muslims, but by admiring Frenchmen and women. His politess, generosity of spirit, broad-ranging intellect and sincerity in his devotions to the Almighty had seduced all but the most hard-core Arab-haters. Monarchists and republicans, believers and non-believers, the rich and the poor, nobles and commoners counted among his champions: Bishop Dupuch, the Duc d'Aumale, Madame de l'Aire, the wife of Major Boissonnet… Baron James Rothschild who had solicited the emir's autograph at the Gare de Lyon railroad station en route to his final departure from Marseille, the private Escoffier who had asked to have the honor of guarding Abd el-Kader in Pau, General Daumas whom the emir called "the key to all murky situations and a slave to his promises…Ferdinand de Lesseps who had visited him in Pau and would later seek the emir's moral support for the Suez Canal…Emile Ollivier, past republican prefect and future prime minister of Emperor Napoleon III.

The *Labrador*, a private steamer that had belonged to the deceased Marquis de Saint Simon was put at the emir's disposal to take him to Istanbul, accompanied by the devoted Boissonnet and his wife, who had insisted on helping him with the transfer of his family. From there, he would be taken to his new home in Bursa with an ample annual living allowance of 100,000 francs* (the French consul in Turkey received a salary of 5000 fr). The sum was deemed by the emperor as appropri-

* This allowance or "pension" was calculated as an annuity when General Randon was war minister under Louis Napoleon. It represented the compensation value over time of his vaste family domains that were expropriated by the French. The annuity was paid by the government to his heirs up until 1954. The amounts paid over time speak millions of the goodwill the emir had earned in France.

ate for a man of Abd el-Kader's stature and having such a large family. Between Louis-Napoleon and Abd el-Kader, a genuine mutual admiration developed. Yet, why Louis-Napoleon's generosity, even affection toward the emir? He was obviously not alone in his admiration. Perhaps he saw in the emir virtues for which he had a nostalgic attachment. Here was a man of a bygone era, chivalrous and generous, stoic in suffering, loyal to his benefactors, honorable toward his enemies, uncorrupted by commercialism and greed, yet also devoted to progress and improving the human condition, while never forgetting his debt to the Almighty. In his mixture of Realpolitik and romanticism, Louis-Napoleon may also have believed a grateful emir could still be useful to France and his pursuit of glory.

But to pursue glory abroad, have prosperity at home and make improvements for the working classes, Louis-Napoleon, now Emperor Napoleon III, had no sure compass to navigate the treacherous crosscurrents of a society deeply divided, wrestling with the new forces of industrialization and demands from the masses for more inclusive government. His dream of restoring France to its position of former greatness converged with a recognition, as he wrote in one of his prison tracts, "that the rule of the classes is over, you can only govern with the masses." This led him into a series of foreign-policy disasters, for he believed that the newly articulate masses thrived on national glory.

There was only one compass for the emir: Islam. Not a narrow sectarian Islam, but an Islam writ large, the Islam of nature and of every living thing that submits to Divine Law. The emir's Islam trusted in a God that is "greater." Greater, that is, than whatever puny man or any of his religions, including Islam, can begin to imagine. "Each person worships and knows Him in certain ways and is ignorant of Him in others." In other words, we are all wrong. Squaring the Oneness of God with the diversity of the ways His creatures worshipped Him was Abd el-Kader's great preoccupation. One of his visitors in Paris had given him a reason to expand on his ideas that had already been incubating in Amboise.

The president of the Asian Society of Paris, Monsieur Reinard, had qualified as one of the few among the many seekers who had the privilege of meeting Abd el-Kader in Paris. On behalf of this international

society of scholars and afficionados of the East, he asked the emir if he would write an autobiography. Three years later, he offered up something unexpected — a window to his soul.

It took the form of a philosophy lesson about man's uniqueness among God's creatures. In the Western literature it has become known as *A Letter to the French,* though in reality its audience was universal, as indicated by the original, cumbersome Arabic title: *Brief Notes for Those with Understanding in Order to Draw Attention to Essential Questions*.

He begins modestly, sensing his limited credibility in the eyes of a French public predisposed to look down on Arabs. "First, realize that it is necessary for an intelligent person to reflect on the words that are spoken, not the person who says them. If the words are true, he will accept them whether he who says them is a known truth teller or a liar. One can extract gold from a lump of dirt. Medication from the venom of a snake…For an intelligent person, wisdom is like a lost sheep which is sought, and can be found anywhere and in any individual."

As to man's uniqueness, he proposed in Platonic fashion that the "perfection" of anything in nature is realized when that thing — animal, plant or mineral — fully expresses its particular distinguishing quality. A horse shares with a donkey the ability to carry heavy loads, but its true essence lies as a creature of grace and speed. A horse is truly a horse only when it gallops at full tilt.

And wherein does the emir believe lies man's distinguishing quality among God's creation? Not in the need for food and the ability to reproduce, which he shares with plants. Nor in his mobility or possession of five senses, which he shares with animals. Only his love of knowledge and the pursuit of truth make man distinctively different from the rest of creation. Whereas animals are prisoners of their senses, man's uniqueness and nobility come from a capacity to grasp a reality beyond the senses — to reach truths of mathematics, geometry, philosophy and the moral truths. The natural respect that even "the stupidest among the Turks or the crudest of the Arabs give to their savants and sheikhs," the emir notes tartly, is further proof that "the search for knowledge is man's distinction."

Abd el-Kader's ultimate reference book is nature. And since nature is God's handiwork, it is self-evident that in nature, properly observed, lies much wisdom. Knowledge, like nature, is also hierarchical.

In the first rank is basic knowledge. This category includes knowledge for agriculture, construction, weaving and politics. Food, shelter and clothing are essential for human physical survival, but the practice of politics in the Greek sense — the art of living together — is equally vital. Man is a social animal. People need to cooperate to survive. Harmonious community life assures adequate resources, mutual aid and collective effort. He compares these needs to the roles played by the human heart, brain and liver.

In second position is toolmaking knowledge, such as carding, loom making and metal working — arts needed to support the primary activities. These correspond to organs such as the stomach, arteries and veins, lungs that serve the brain, the heart and the liver. And finally, there is knowledge of the finishing arts — grinding, bread making or wool cleaning. Such knowledge corresponds to the teeth, eyelids and fingernails of the human body. Of the three categories of knowledge, the noblest activities are the basic ones. On their backs, society is built. And the greatest of these activities is politics.

That Abd el-Kader uses human body parts to illustrate a hierarchy of knowledge needed to make life agreeable is not surprising. For him, society is a living organism knit together by structured relationships. If those relationships are good, the parts work together in harmony. If the relationships are bad, the parts war with each other, or stop functioning. Updating the emir's metaphor, perhaps politics is the hormonal system that regulates and balances relationships according to life's circumstances.

Politics, however, requires a "higher degree of perfection than all other forms of knowledge." Why? Because it affects the way people live together. Political life should be governed not by the distortions of ambition and love of power, but by generosity and care — the hormones that build unity and closeness. In Abd el-Kader's view, there is no knowledge more important than that needed for understanding the elements of collective life and guiding human behavior in a just and righteous way.

Yet, politics itself is of two kinds: the politics of the throne, and the politics of religious scholars, or ulema. The former has power over the external aspects of people's lives — taxes, military service, employment — but not over their inner life. The religious scholars have the ability

to influence men's interior lives, but they should refrain from the direct exercise of power, which can only corrupt. They do, however, have a duty to speak truth to power and to expose injustice.

The expert, whatever his métier, influences the spirit of the person seeking his knowledge, according to the kind of knowledge being taught — the purpose it serves and the rigor of its arguments. Comparing mathematics to astronomy Abd el-Kader elevates mathematics, as he considers the methods of mathematics more rigorous. Comparing medicine with mathematics, he judges medicine the higher form of knowledge because the purpose of medicine is to save lives, even if its methods are less rigorous. Mathematics is a superior form of knowledge by the force of its reasoning, but Abd el-Kader gives greater importance to goals than to methods. Comparing medical knowledge with religious knowledge, he holds religious knowledge superior. Medical knowledge can achieve, at best, only temporary salvation of the body, while divine knowledge offers salvation for eternity.

So let us now pause for a moment. Here Abd el-Kader's reasoning joins that of other believers, but excludes the nonbelieving, materialistic modern man. The force of his argument assumes what modernists deny: a creator, revelation, an immortal soul and a Judgment Day. The believers among the children of Abraham differ on details of the story, but they accept the premise: our short sojourn on earth is but a preparation for an eternal one.

The only permanent, enduring reality is God. The One. The Universal Soul. The source from which all things flow, and to which they return. God's presence is in all his creation, just as a writer's presence is in his writing, a chef's in his cooking, a parent's presence in its child. Abd el-Kader recognizes that such knowledge is not shared by all believers; in fact, by very a few. Why?

Because we are all spiritually sick, to a greater or lesser degree. Knowledge is effect, not cause. Its cause is *aql*. Man's desire for knowledge proceeds from *aql*, just as light comes from the sun. What is this thing, *aql*, the French translate as ésprit? Whereas English distinguishes between mind and spirit, the French ésprit combines "spirit," as in "Holy Spirit" or "team spirit", and "mind," which includes intelligence, reason and discernment.

The richness of the human spirit varies, the emir reminds us, just as the availability of water in the earth. Water readily gushes forth in some places; in most, it must be dug for, and in others it is nonexistent. Like finding water, most of us have to dig to find our source within. Alas, some of us are dry holes. All men have the ability to acquire a certain degree of knowledge, but that "certain degree" depends on their inner, spiritual reservoir, which is a seedlike potential.

Aql is important for moral reasons. It is one of the four virtues needed for achieving that distinctively human potential — moral improvement. *Aql* makes possible "distinguishing truth from error, promotes memory, good judgment, energy and a discerning eye in situations requiring finesse." But moral perfection demands three other qualities: courage, self-control and just behavior.

Just, or equitable behavior, is free from the emotions of anger, greed, envy and impatience. Courage, in the emir's lexicon, is that quality of the spirit that either directs or restrains anger in order to do what is right — that is, moral courage. Courage carries with it companion qualities of generosity, endurance, firmness, compassion and the spirit of sacrifice. The fourth virtue needed for moral progress is self-control, a requirement to hold in check unruly passions that lead us astray. Which brings us back to justice, that essential glue for social harmony that requires self-control and courage. "Whoever possesses these four mothers of moral virtue deserves to be either a king, or an advisor to kings and men. Those who do not, yet call themselves servants of God, should be banished." Wisdom and virtue are inseparable.

It should be obvious to any healthy spirit, Abd el-Kader tells us, that the *aql* wasn't given to man simply to gather rain water — which is to say, simply the fruits of practical knowledge. Mundane knowledge is constantly changing, or disappearing, as new knowledge is acquired. "Without question, the most worthy knowledge of all is of God the Highest and of the wisdom that is transparent in His creation."

Man gains this higher knowledge not through his senses, but through his spirit. The senses are stimulated only by what is presented to them. They are not "fecund." They lead to believing that the earth is flat. "Without the spirit," Abd el-Kader writes, "the senses can't evaluate the future, assess risk and benefit, draw conclusions that lead to new knowledge or perceive final ends." That is why spirit, or *aql*, is the

noblest of man's faculties. It is the part that can see what is invisible to the eye. It is the part that belongs to God.

Abd el-Kader left France deeply impressed by its "spirit of practical application." Nonetheless, he believed the French savants fell short in the "spirit of speculation," which, alone, permits attaining knowledge of God and the wisdom that lies within His creation. No doubt the emir's opinion — not wholly accurate (Pasteur was a devout Catholic) — was influenced by the absence in France of a Muslim's reflexive recognition of the Creator's role in one's accomplishments. To not openly acknowledge God is to be ungrateful, like not thanking someone for a gift. To not acknowledge God is to cut oneself off from Divine Wisdom.

And wherein does that wisdom lie? In nature itself, to be sure, but in Divine Law, as transmitted across the ages by His prophets. The Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Koran are all repositories of this prophetic knowledge. Only through a deep understanding of these revelations can men approach moral perfection and become truly healthy spirits. Like Rabbi Hillel,* Abd el-Kader tells us to go forth and study the Word with an open heart. But this knowledge cannot be obtained by the human spirit alone.

The knowledge of Divine Law possessed by the prophets can be acquired only through faith in their teachings, and by obeying them. Thus, obedience is the guardian of all the virtues.

When the body is sick, we turn to doctors and their specialized knowledge. A person with an aching finger might apply an ointment directly on the finger until a doctor, someone with higher knowledge, points out that the ointment should go on the opposite shoulder. The patient might consider this nonsense at first. When the doctor explains the way nerves are distributed in the body, the intelligent patient accepts the doctor's recommendation. He obeys.

The prophets also possess a deeper knowledge, though of a different kind. From Adam to Mohammed, these doctors of the spirit have a special gift that goes beyond mere intelligence and allows them to be vessels of Divine Wisdom. Call it a third eye. With it, they can perceive

* Hillel is thought by some to have been a teacher of Jesus. When asked by a pagan to explain Judaism, Hillel replied: "That which is harmful to you, don't do to others. The rest is detail. Go forth and study."

differently and see further. Like the gift of poetry, or music, it is not possessed by most people. The prophets are all equal in their capacity to mediate God's wisdom. Each has a portion of the Divine Wisdom to transmit. Intellectual knowledge is food, but knowledge of Divine Law is the cure for sick spirits. Most people are satisfied with the food, unaware that they are even sick. The cures are found through following God's ordinances.

Some Divine Laws may be difficult to understand, like a doctor's recommendation to put ointment on the shoulder opposite from the painful finger. This merely reflects the weakness of the spirit. A healthy spirit can grasp the reasons when they are explained. Abd el-Kader illustrates using the case of gold and silver.

The Koran prohibits hording gold and silver without giving a portion to the poor. A sensible and just person might object. "I worked hard for my gold and I will do with it what I want. Why should I give some to the poor? I made this money myself."

These seemingly reasonable objections ignore a higher wisdom, says the emir. Gold and silver have no use in themselves. They don't protect a person against the cold, they can't be eaten. These metals were created by God to serve as a universal medium of exchange so people can easily acquire things that are useful without the cumbersome need to barter. Their purpose in life is to circulate from hand to hand. To hoard gold without giving a portion to the poor is unjust. "God didn't create man to live naked and in poverty," the indignant emir exclaims. It is the duty of the rich to help the poor. Those who ignore this rule will be punished, if not in this world, then in the next.

Worse than hoarding is conspicuous consumption, which occurs when gold and silver are used frivolously for plates and cups. Such a misuse of God's creation is like "employing a judge to work as a butcher." To disrespect the distinctive quality of a thing or a person, is to degrade it, to render it "imperfect." Platonically speaking, tableware has only one purpose — to contain food and drink. For this, many other less noble materials, such as clay or bronze, are available.

Lending gold for a price is an offense, as well. It transforms a friendly act — helping someone in need — into a form of subjugation. Abd el-Kader ends his discourse on gold and silver by reminding his reader that generosity and mutual aid are the bonds that hold a society

together. At the core of all religions are rules of behavior that promote neighborliness and friendship. True understanding of Divine Law leads to that conclusion.

Nor is there any contradiction between knowledge of Divine Law, as revealed by the prophets, and intellectual knowledge acquired by man. "The prophets," the emir writes, "were not sent to debate with philosophers or argue with scientists over whether the earth is a sphere or made up four of elements." Science, however, should never be used to contradict the oneness of God. "Those who say such and such scientific knowledge contradicts religion or that religion is against such and such knowledge sin against religion." Above all, the prophets remind us to be thankful and to glorify God as Creator of the universe.

Nor do the prophets contradict each other — not, at least, in the fundamentals. They all have a common message: glorify God and show compassion for all his creatures. The laws preached by all the prophets concern respect for the soul, the mind, for property and for the rights of inheritance. Their differences concern the different ways for preserving these laws.

Abd el-Kader understood Divine Revelation as multilayered truth, deposited over time, like geological strata. "The laws dictated by the prophets vary according to the considerations which inspired them at the time. The interests and needs of men change over the ages, and all judgments are just only in terms of the circumstances of the people at the time they are promulgated. Religious law can change for the same reason a doctor may change his prescriptions." Anyway, Abd el-Kader reminds his readers, God can do whatever God wants. He can establish or eliminate a law without justification. His wisdom alone determines the duration of the law and the time of its abrogation.

"The Jews objected to Jesus for annulling their laws, but the teachings of Jesus say nothing about the legal code. He offered instead parables and exhortations. *I come not to change the law, but to fulfill it.* The response of the Christ to the Jews is the same as that of the Muslims to the Christians. The Prophet Mohammed said, in effect, 'I have not come to annul the Gospels or the Law of Moses, but to make them more perfect. The Mosaic Law concerns the external behavior of men generally. The Gospels speak to the hearts of individuals.'

"The wisdom of Moses is based on action, and is concerned with obligations and proscriptions," the emir recapitulates. "The wisdom of the Messiah is concerned with the spirit, inviting renunciation in order to attain higher truths. The wisdom of Mohammed unites both. The prophets only differ in the details of certain rules." Reasoning like the good polygamist he was, Abd el-Kader proposes that "they are like men who have a common father, but each has a different mother."

An arrow in the sky, one among many. So the emir modestly described the manuscript he sent to the president of the Asiatic Society. It landed well. On July 9, 1855, France's main daily newspaper, *Le Moniteur Universel*, published a summary of the emir's essay. It made a strong enough impression on the intellectuals of Paris that one of them, Gustave Dugat, an Arabist of distinction, thought this "arrow in the sky" deserved a full exposition.

Three years later, Dugat explained why in his 1858 introduction to his translation of the full text *(Le Livre d'Abd el-Kader)* published by the Academy of Sciences. Contemporary "Arab philosophy" was little known in France. The work of Abd el-Kader bore clear traces of Greek thought and showed "the marks of a superior mind that knows how to think." Even if the author's ideas were sometimes deficient in details, Dugat praised the emir's points of view as "always elevated and often original."

On the emir's treatment of faith and reason, Dugat was astonished. "He speaks like a theologian at the Sorbonne and is in perfect communion with the Pope, when he says,

'Faith is above reason; but, as they both come from God, there can be no conflict between them, only mutual support.'

"The emir reasons like us regarding revealed religion," Dugat affirmed, "prophecy is above reason, which by itself cannot comprehend the wisdom of the prophets."

Gustave Dugat's effort to rescue from oblivion the moral philosophy of a man who had conquered the Parisian elite six years earlier would have touched the emir's friend, Bishop Antoine-Adolphe Dupuch, if only he had been alive. In 1856, the debt-ridden Dupuch had died a pauper, a victim of man's golden rule. His creditors virtually hounded him to death, while his friends kept him one step away from prison. Yet

poverty, his friends said, did not bother Dupuch in the end. Like Abd el-Kader, he had detached himself from the things of this world.

And like the emir, whose greatest difficulties in his struggle against French occupiers were with his own kind, so too Dupuch. Those who opposed most strenuously his calling in Algeria were not Arabs, but anticlerical Frenchmen who, illwilled, or wellmeaning but ignorant, feared that Jesus-loving ministers of God with their crucifixes and statues of the Virgin would offend Muslims. Prisoners of their own anticlerical prejudices, they did not know what the Duke of Rovigo (Commander of the Army of Africa in 1831–32,) had learned when he asked the mufti of Algiers if he could convert one of their mosques into a church. Rather than be insulted, the mufti acted elated: "May God be blessed, may Africa rejoice! The French can no longer be accused of not believing in God. Take whichever mosque suits you the best. The form of worship may change but not the Master, for the God of the Christians is also ours. We are only different in the way we address ourselves to Him."

In exile, the emir echoed the mufti's thoughts differently. "Our God and the God of all the communities different from ours are in reality all one God…He reveals himself to Muslims as beyond all form, to Christians in the person of Jesus Christ and monks…he reveals himself even to pagans who worship objects. For no worshipper of something finite worships the thing for itself. What he worships through this object is the Epiphany of God." At age forty-four, Abd el-Kader's new life in exile seemed set on a course of study, teaching and pious meditation that would lead to a peaceful end in the Almighty's embrace.

Higher Wisdom had a different plan, however. Nature and great power politics were its instruments.